

The Red-Black Alliance: Fascist- Communist Cooperation (1919-1941)

By Nevin Gussack

Despite the anti-communism of Benito Mussolini and his lieutenants, Italian Fascism maintained a love-hate relationship with the Communist Party of Italy and the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Fascism opposed the class struggle within the nation as prescribed by Marxism. Yet, the Italian Fascists concurrently admired the militancy and revolutionary feelings of the Communists and the USSR. Both Soviet Communism and Italian Fascism jointly opposed liberal capitalism and governments limited with checks and balances. In the earliest period of the development of Fascism, the program and actions of Mussolini and his comrades closely approximated that of the Italian Communists and most revolutionary Socialists. In 1919, Mussolini was dubbed the “*Lenin of Italy*” for the Fascist occupation of factories on behalf of their workers. One of the major heroes of Fascism was the poet and pilot Gabriele d’Annunzio. D’Annunzio believed that Mussolini’s Fascism was a form of Latinized National Bolshevism.¹ At the end of 1922, Mussolini attempted to win over the Italian extreme left through fiery speeches in the Chamber of Deputies. Mussolini offered the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) cooperation in launching an anti-monarchical and anti-capitalist revolution.²

Sometimes, the Fascists threatened to jointly destroy the liberal government of Italy in cooperation with the communists. Both the Communists and the Fascists sought to destroy the old regime and replace it with a centralized, authoritarian regime. Natural affinities would develop between the seemingly opposing forces. Mussolini threatened the Socialist leader Filippo Turati: “*Don’t think you’ll find it easy to destroy us. We will not shrink from allying ourselves even with the communists in order to defend ourselves against you.*” Even in 1921, Mussolini was prepared to work with the General Confederation of Labor (CGL), which was controlled by the Socialists and Communists. The Fascist-turned-Communist Delio Cantimori recalled that “*I entered the Fascist Party in 1926. I was in a state of mental confusion and had really no excuse for it...But I was convinced that Fascism had carried out the true Italian revolution and was still doing so and that it should become a European revolution; and I believed one had to work along these lines.*”³ Based on such testimony, it was no surprise that in the early 1920s, the largest body adherents of Fascism were ex-Communists.⁴ A number of former Socialists and Communists became Fascists. They included Nicola Bombacci, Robert Farinacci, Cesare Rossi, Massimo Rocca, and Leandro Arpinati.⁵

During the Fascist struggle for power, various Bolshevik leaders in Russia admired the strong, authoritarian leadership qualities of Mussolini and regretted his defection from revolutionary Marxism. According to Sarfatti, Lenin stated regretfully to a delegation of Italian Socialists: “*Mussolini? A great pity he is lost to us! He is a strong man, who would have led our*

¹ Walker, Bruce. “Fascists and Bolsheviks As Friends” Canada Free Press January 31, 2008 Accessed From: <http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/1633>

²Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot (Regnery Gateway 1990) Accessed From: <http://mises.org/document/6581/Leftism-From-de-Sade-and-Marx-to-Hitler-and-Marcuse>

³ Urban, George R. Eurocommunism: Its Roots and Future in Italy and Elsewhere (Universe Books, 1978) pages 160-161.

⁴ Pipes, Richard. Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2011) page 264.

⁵ Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot (Regnery Gateway 1990) Accessed From: <http://mises.org/document/6581/Leftism-From-de-Sade-and-Marx-to-Hitler-and-Marcuse>

party to victory." Trotsky spoke in the same vein: "...*the only man who could have carried through a revolution was Mussolini.*"⁶

Mussolini also admired the Bolshevik penchant for centralized government and propensity for violence. In 1921, Mussolini addressed the communists in the Chamber of Deputies: "*Between us and the communists there are no political affinities but there are intellectual ones. Like you (communists), we consider necessary a centralized unitary state which imposes iron discipline and all persons, with this difference, that you reached this conclusion by way of the concept of class, and we by the way of the concept of nation.*" In February 1921, Mussolini noted: "*I reject all forms of Bolshevism, but if I had to choose one it I would choose the Bolshevism of Moscow and Lenin, for its giant, barbarian, universal scale.*"⁷

While the Soviets objected to the anti-Marxism of the Fascists, Moscow also admired the revolutionary militancy and the harsh political methods of Mussolini's followers. In an interview with the Il Corriere della Sera, Soviet writer Maxim Gorky expressed his admiration for the Fascist rigged elections of 1924: "*From the governmental acts of Mussolini I have come to know his energy and I admire him...*" Trotsky commented that "*Mussolini carried out a revolution; he's our best pupil.*"⁸ At the Twelfth Communist Party of the Soviet Union Congress (1923), Bukharin observed: "*It is characteristic of Fascist methods of combat that they more than any other party, have adopted and applied in practice the experiences of the Russian Revolution. If they are considered from the formal point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the technique of their political methods, then it is a full application of Bolshevik tactics and especially of Russian Bolshevism in the sense of rapid concentration of forces and energetic action of a tightly structured military organization in the sense of a particular system of committing one's forces, mobilization, etc. and the pitiless destruction of the enemy whenever this is necessary and demanded by the circumstances.*"⁹

Lenin begged Italian Socialists not to wage a revolution, which paved the way for the Fascists to take power. Lenin also sought to develop cordial relations with Fascist Italy. Lenin transmitted the following secret instructions to Foreign Commissar Georgy Chicherin: "*Start a highly circumspect flirtation with Italy immediately.*" A senior Soviet diplomat named Vatslav Vorovsky met with Mussolini in November 1922. At this meeting, Mussolini expressed his confidence in the stability of the Bolshevik system. In November 1922, Yuri Steklov authored an Izvestia article which praised the political pragmatism of Mussolini. A senior Comintern official named Jules Humbert-Droz claimed that Mussolini's motive for affording diplomatic recognition

⁶ Sarfatti, Margherita G. and Mussolini, Benito. The Life of Benito Mussolini (Kessinger Publishing, LLC 2010) page 278.

⁷ Pipes, Richard. Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2011) page 252.

⁸ Urban, George R. Eurocommunism: Its Roots and Future in Italy and Elsewhere (Universe Books, 1978) page 164.

⁹ Pipes, Richard. Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2011) page 253.

of the USSR was to split the Italian Left.¹⁰ In 1922, Mussolini declared to the Chamber of Deputies that Italy had nothing to fear from the Soviet Union.¹¹

Some elements of the Western left viewed Fascism as a progressive doctrine that fulfilled aspects of the Socialist dream via statist economic programs and a commitment to revolutionary mass mobilization. In the mid-1920s, the Soviet Communist, Victor Serge, met with the pro-fascist Italian Socialist Nicola Bombacci in Berlin. Serge posed a question to Bombacci: “*Why didn’t you get rid of Mussolini at the time of the destruction of the cooperatives?*” Bombacci confirmed to Serge that the many of the best leftwing activists became Fascists: “*Because our most militant and energetic men had gone over to him.*” Serge observed that Fascism attracted much of the revolutionary Left through:

- 1) Support for “*plebeian force and violence.*”
- 2) Ambitious public works and industrialization programs.
- 3) Fascism’s desire to construct an imperialist empire.

Serge commented that “*It is impossible to review the Fascist phenomenon without discovering the importance of its interrelations with revolutionary socialism.*” One of the founding members of the Comintern, Henri Guilbeaux, commented that Mussolini was an authentic, revolutionary heir to Lenin.¹²

Fascist Italy praised the Soviet Union after Stalin became dictator in 1929. In the 1920s and 1930s, Italian Fascist journals of law and philosophy devoted much space to articles which exalted the Soviet Union.¹³ In 1932, Mussolini noted that “*In the whole negative part we are alike. We and the Russians are against the liberals, against democrats, against parliament.*” In 1933, Mussolini publically urged Stalin to follow the Fascist model.¹⁴

The Fascists even realized that Communism was cut from the same socialist and collectivist cloth. Both aspired to construct a classless society as an ultimate goal. In 1931, when Alfred Bingham¹⁵ visited Italy, Mussolini informed him “*Fascism is the same thing as Communism.*”¹⁶ In 1933, the leftwing Fascist theoretician Ugo Spirito noted that “*One does a disservice to Fascism in conceiving it as antithetical to Bolshevism as one might oppose good and evil or truth and error. If today the energies of the political orientation (of our time) find expression in Fascism and Bolshevism, it is clear that the future belongs not to that regime*

¹⁰ Agursky, Mikhail. The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR (Westview Press, 1987) page 300.

¹¹ Walker, Bruce. “Fascists and Bolsheviks As Friends” Canada Free Press January 31, 2008 Accessed From: <http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/1633>

¹² Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot (Regnery Gateway 1990) Accessed From: <http://mises.org/document/6581/Leftism-From-de-Sade-and-Marx-to-Hitler-and-Marcuse>

¹³ Urban, George R. Eurocommunism: Its Roots and Future in Italy and Elsewhere (Universe Books, 1978) page 163.

¹⁴ Pipes, Richard. Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2011) pages 252-253.

¹⁵ Bingham was the son of a conservative Republican Senator in the United States. He visited both the USSR and Fascist Italy.

¹⁶ Walker, Bruce. “Fascists and Bolsheviks As Friends” Canada Free Press January 31, 2008 Accessed From: <http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/1633>

which negates the other, but that which, of the two, has shown itself capable of incorporating and transcending the other in a more advanced form. ¹⁷

The Soviet Union and Fascist Italy also forged close trade relations, which included mutual exchanges of weapons and strategic goods. Both the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy engaged in varying degrees of heavy state interventionism within the economy. Joseph Clarke wrote that “*The Soviet and Italian economic organizations similarly called for more national regulation. Production controls, including those directed toward capital costs, profits, and wages, inevitably were bound up with trade regulations and credit policy. Trade unions in both ideocracies became part of the state machinery and acted only within the framework of new institutions resting on the foundations of the corporative cooperation of workers, employers, and state in Italy, or on the socialist cooperation of party and state in the Soviet Union.*”¹⁸ Former Soviet GRU General Alexander Barmine recalled that “*Soviet technicians came to the conclusion that Italy, which they had always considered a backward nation, had made enormous strides since the war and now possessed up-to-date industrial equipment. We bought Fiat cars, airplane engines, dockyard equipment, and ships. At Venice, Genoa, and Trieste the naval yards built merchant ships for us. I traveled all over the country and met several leaders of Italian industry. I had to negotiate the purchase of a number of ships with old Admiral Count Ciano. He offered three-year credits, but we wanted five. We could come to no agreement. My dealings with Senator Agnelli, of the Fiat Works, and with Signor Benni, of the electrotechnical industry, were more successful.*”¹⁹ Italy exported destroyers for the Soviet Navy, while the firms Fiat and Ansaldo supplied weapons to the Red Army.²⁰

Italian submarines visited the Black Sea ports of Batum, Odessa, and Sebastopol. The Italian crew members met with Soviet Naval personnel. Soviet naval cruisers and destroyers visited the Italian port of Naples. In 1934, the Fascists and Soviets dispatched delegations to observe Red Army and Italian military maneuvers. In November 1936, twenty high level Soviet officers and Party officials such as Marshals Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Semyon Budnenny visited the Italian Embassy to view Fascist films which covered the conquest of Ethiopia. Starting in 1925, the Italian Fascists rendered assistance for the Soviet naval shipbuilding industry. The Italian firm Ansaldo signed a contract with the Soviets, which called for the provisioning of 34 million lire worth of naval motors and technical assistance. Ansaldo also built two escort vessels for the Soviet Navy. In October 1934, Ansaldo also provided the USSR with 40 naval guns of various calibers. Both the Soviets and Italians were pleased with the development of mutual trade and military relations. The Italian Fascist diplomat Bernardo Attolico praised Soviet hospitality, industry, agriculture, and economic cooperation. The Soviets also concluded a Pact of Friendship, Neutrality, and Nonaggression with Fascist Italy. Soviet

¹⁷ Urban, George R. Eurocommunism: Its Roots and Future in Italy and Elsewhere (Universe Books, 1978) page 112.

¹⁸ Clark, J. Calvitt. Russia and Italy against Hitler: The Bolshevik-Fascist Rapprochement of the 1930s (Greenwood Press New York 1991) pages 99-101.

¹⁹ Barmine, Alexander. One Who Survived, the Life Story of a Russian under the Soviets (G.P. Putnam's Sons New York 1945) pages 188-190.

²⁰ Sutton, Antony C. Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development 1930-1945 (Hoover Institution Press Stanford University CA 1971) Accessed From:
http://archive.org/stream/Sutton--Western-Technology-1930-1945/Sutton--WesternTechnologyAndSovietEconomicDevelopment1930To1945_djvu.txt

military missions visited Italy during much of the early 1930s. Izvestia thanked the Italian Fascists for the “exceptional courtesy given the mission by the military authorities and by the Italian government.”²¹

Despite Moscow’s professions of anti-colonialism, the USSR shipped strategic goods which fueled the Fascist war machine. In 1936, the Soviet Union shipped oil and coal to Italy, which was in violation of a League of Nations embargo.²² In 1936, it was reported that the Soviet Union shipped coal, timber, wheat, oil, and coal tar to Fascist Italy.²³ Soviet coal tar was used by the Italians to build roads in occupied Ethiopia. Soviet government-owned monopolies sold goods to the Fascists. Moscow’s goods were shipped through the Black Sea in Greek freighters. Coal was shipped from Nicolaiev to Eritrea, while lumber was shipped directly from Sebastopol to Italy. Soviet coal exports powered electric power plants in Fascist-occupied Ethiopia. Wheat was shipped from Odessa, while cement was shipped from Nicolaiev to Eritrea. The cement was utilized for Italian building projects and military bases in occupied Ethiopia. Soviet oil was carried aboard Italian tankers from Batum to Italian ports.²⁴

Relations between Moscow and Rome were once again solidified around the time of the signing of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. Discussions of the ideological commonalities of the Fascists and the Communists and their joint opposition to capitalism peppered the discourse of the state-controlled Italian press. In 1938, Mussolini noted “*In the face of the total collapse of the system of Lenin, Stalin has become a secret Fascist.*”²⁵ According to a German memorandum, Mussolini welcomed the Nazi-Soviet rapprochement on the grounds that “...in their ideological struggle against plutocracy and capitalism, the Axis Powers had, to a certain extent, the same objectives as the Russian regime.”²⁶ In 1939, Ardengo Soffici noted that Fascism and communism were proletarian movements aimed at a revolution against bourgeois capitalism.²⁷ In October 1940, Virginio Gayda noted that “*I have already pointed out that the new demographic and family policy in Russia, with its system of laws not dissimilar to that created by the Fascist regime. No less notable are the directions taken by economic and social policies which tend toward forms of autarchic organizations and authoritarian principles in the management of businesses.*”²⁸ Roberto Farinacci praised the Russian Revolution as an expression of land hunger on the part of the peasantry. He praised the three major revolutions in

²¹ Clark, J. Calvitt. Russia and Italy against Hitler: The Bolshevik-Fascist Rapprochement of the 1930s (Greenwood Press New York 1991) pages 145-156.

²² “Huge Soviet Sales of Oil Help Italy” New York Times February 5, 1936 page 13.

²³ “Sanctions Violation is Denied in Moscow” New York Times January 23, 1936 page 12.

²⁴ “Soviet Continues Selling to Italy” New York Times January 17, 1936 page 4.

²⁵ Pipes, Richard. Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2011) pages 252-253.

²⁶ Shirer, William. Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (Original Publication: Simon and Schuster 1959) Accessed From: <http://ajaytao2010.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/rise-and-fall-of-the-third-reich-william-shirer-pdf.pdf>

²⁷ Matthews, Herbert L. “Rome Acclaims End of Encirclement” New York Times August 23, 1939 page 2.

²⁸ “Soviet Acclaimed by Italy as Friend” New York Times October 3, 1940 page 1.

Italy, Germany, and the USSR as an anti-capitalist alliance.²⁹ Anti-Semitic, radical Fascists also praised the various Soviet measures which purged Jews from the government. In 1939, the Fascist newspaper Il Resto del Carlino praised the Soviet removal of Jews from prominent positions as an “*improvement.*”³⁰

After 1936, Soviet-Italian trade declined precipitously. However, commercial relations between Rome and Moscow were never completely severed. Italian exports to the Soviet Union totaled 9 million lire in 1937, while Moscow’s exports to the Fascists totaled 105 million lire. Italian exports to the Soviet Union totaled 1 million lire in 1938, while Moscow’s exports to the Fascists totaled only 7 million lire. By January 1939, Italy and the Soviet Union attempted to increase the value of two-way trade relations. In February 1939, Fascist Italy and the USSR signed a commercial trade agreement. The Italian firm Ansaldo exported the cruiser destined for the Soviet Navy. The Italian Ambassador to the USSR Augusto Rosso held a conversation with Soviet Deputy Foreign Affairs Commissar V.P. Potemkin. In that conversation, Potemkin told Rosso that “*I am convinced that before long your great leader will recognize that between Italy and the USSR exists a community of political interests...*” Fascist Italy’s trade and political relations with the Soviet Union continued until late June 1941, when the Axis invaded the USSR. Italy joined Germany and its other European allies in this invasion, known as Operation Barbarossa.³¹

However, Italian Fascist affinities for Bolshevism never completely dissipated after June 1941. Some Fascists quietly expressed a preference for a Communist takeover of Italy, in the event of an Allied victory. A prominent Fascist named Ardengo Soffici noted in June 1944: “*If the Axis were not to win, most true Fascists, who escaped the flail, would pass over to communism and form a bloc with it. We would then have crossed the gap which separates the two revolutions.*”³² In 1944, Mussolini praised Stalin. In fact, the Italian dictator elaborated that in the event of an Axis defeat, he would prefer the Soviet domination of Europe.³³

After World War II, many Fascists became the hardline Stalinist Communists who dominated northern Italy in the immediate postwar period. Leddin noted that “*The Romagna, very red today, was very fascist in the 1920s and 1930s.*” Curzio Malaparte was an example of a Fascist who converted to communism. In fact, Malaporte wrote a book which lauded Red

²⁹ Royal Institute for International Affairs. Review of the Foreign Press 1939-1945 Series A Volume 1 Enemy Countries Axis Controlled Europe October 3, 1939 to December 23, 1939 (Kraus, 1980)

³⁰ “Fascist Paper Lays Change in Soviet Policy to ‘purge of Jews’” JTA August 31, 1939 Accessed From: <http://archive.jta.org/article/1939/08/31/2847898/fascist-paper-lays-change-in-soviet-policy-to-purge-of-jews>

³¹ “Italy and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939” The Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians 3 (December 1996) Accessed From: <http://users.ju.edu/jclarke/wizzg.html>

³² Urban, George R. Eurocommunism: Its Roots and Future in Italy and Elsewhere (Universe Books, 1978) page 100.

³³ Walker, Bruce. “Fascists and Bolsheviks As Friends” Canada Free Press January 31, 2008 Accessed From: <http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/1633>

China.³⁴ The editor of the Italian Communist Party newspaper l'Unità David Laiolo served in the Nazi-dominated Fascist Social Republic (RSI). He wrote The Mouth of the Woman-The Mouth of the Gun, which lauded Fascist militance. Many ex-Fascists joined the Italian Communist Party and became prominent in the cultural field. Togliatti noted in 1948 that the “*enormous distance that appeared to separate us from the mass of young Fascists was due largely to a misunderstanding.*”³⁵

Many of the postwar Fascists became officials and activists of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), which initially adhered to the radical program of 1919. They held anti-American, anti-capitalist views which opposed the Western Allies and the Christian Democratic government in Italy. Elements of the MSI even supported an opening to the East Bloc and the USSR based on a common anti-Americanism. MSI leader Giorgio Almirante opposed Italy’s entry into NATO. The Italian Communist Party saw an opportunity to forge a united, anti-US front in Italy and courted the anti-NATO wing of the MSI. In 1947, Italian Communist Party leader Giancarlo Pajetta opened talks with several veterans of the former Social Republic (RSI), which included Concetto Pettinato, head of the main fascist paper during the RSI period; RSI Vice-Minister of the Interior Giorgio Pini; Admiral Ferruccio Ferrini Vice-Minister of the RSI Navy; war hero decorated by Wehrmacht Field Marshal Kesselring Lando Dell’Amico; and influential RSI newspaperman Stanis Ruinas. The Italian Communists then financed a magazine titled Il Pensiero Nazionale, which was edited by Stanis Ruinas and targeted at ex-RSI Fascists. Ruinas was replaced by Lando Dell’Amico, who former Italian Communist Party official Ignazio Silone called “*one of the boldest and most tireless of the neofascist militants.*” Dell’Amico’s task was to “*enlist other fascists in a united front against America.*” The Italian Communists also used anti-Zionism as a bridge to bolster its ties to the ex-Fascists.³⁶

In conclusion, Fascist-Communist cooperation mirrored the opportunistic alliances developed by Reds and extreme Nationalists in other nations. Both extremes were opposed to liberal capitalism and political systems and sought to develop varying types of collectivist societies. One contemporary example of a “*Right/Left*” alliance was the cooperation developed between radical Islam and Marxism-Leninism. Hence, the Red-Black alliances continue to this day and represent an ongoing threat to free societies.

³⁴ Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot (Regnery Gateway 1990) Accessed From: <http://mises.org/document/6581/Leftism-From-de-Sade-and-Marx-to-Hitler-and-Marcuse>

³⁵ Urban, George R. Eurocommunism: Its Roots and Future in Italy and Elsewhere (Universe Books, 1978) page 167.

³⁶Coogan, Kevin. Dreamer of the Day (Autonomedia, 1999) pages 210-211.